

ESSEX - MIDDLE RIVER COMMUNITY CONSERVATION PLAN

compared to an overall county density of 4.16 persons per acre in the urbanized areas. Five (5) of the top ten (10) county elementary schools in serving free and reduced lunches are in the study area. Three (3) elementary schools have a turnover rate of over 60%. Only four (4) of the twelve (12) elementary schools ranked higher than the national average in math and reading. There are concerns over youth gangs appearing in some of the housing complexes and of increased vice and narcotic offenses. Much of the police activity has centered around the rental housing.

One of the primary concerns of area residents and businesses has been the poor image of the community. The image of a community tends over time to reinforce itself, and the image of this community as a stable, hard-working, proud community has deteriorated. The community action plan is an attempt by members of the community and by the County administration to reverse the trend and to support, enhance and conserve the many assets available in the community.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

INFRASTRUCTURE

The aging infrastructure is a county-wide problem in the urbanized areas. Already steps have been taken to repair alleys and sidewalks. As in every older community there are roads to be repaired, sidewalks to be fixed. In no way does this Report intend to minimize the importance of these on-going maintenance matters. They most directly affect the most residents. A number of general and specific infrastructure actions, however, are necessary with respect to the Essex - Middle River community.

5. THE COMMUNITY SHOULD HAVE INPUT ON PRIORITIZATION OF COMMUNITY CAPITAL SPENDING.

Too often it appears that capital projects are prioritized by agencies acting outside the community.

There are many capital projects for which money could be spent, and the community needs to know before the capital spending priorities have been decided what the recommendations may be. The community should be given the opportunity for meaningful input on capital issues.

6. A NEW MARTIN BOULEVARD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SHOULD BE BUILT.

The old building simply is not suited to the current needs of the community. The building is over fifty (50) years old and requires constant maintenance attention. A new building with modern education tools is needed to provide a valuable education and will probably save taxpayer dollars in the long term. A community resource center should be included as part of a new Martin Boulevard Elementary School to replace the Middle River mini-library that was closed by Baltimore County.

7. AN EXPANDED LIBRARY IS NEEDED TO SERVE THE ESSEX- MIDDLE RIVER COMMUNITY.

A proposal has been put forth by the library system that deserves attention. The library already serves as a mini-community center, and could become a valuable hub in providing community service and resources. Over 50% of the residents of the community rely on public transportation, and the consolidation of services at a convenient location open in the evenings is important. The Essex library is very well located with ample parking and easy access. It is well utilized not only for the library resources but also for educational and community programs. The library has become an important part of the life of the community, has tremendous data banks and resources, and expansion of this facility would serve as a resource for the entire community.

8. ACTION IS NEEDED ON EXPANDED ACTIVE RECREATION FACILITIES.

Currently, only 2.5% of the total land area in the study area is devoted to parks and open space. Almost all of this resource is located in areas removed from the bulk of the population. The local school playing fields are the primary source of active recreation, and they

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are stressed. The county should move to acquire some of the 1,465 acres of vacant land in the study area for conversion to active recreation pursuits. In addition, due to negligible opportunity for indoor recreation, some of the commercial buildings, particularly in the Stemmers Run, Back River Neck Road area should be considered for indoor recreation facilities.

9. CONVERSION OF OLDER BUILDINGS FOR COMMUNITY PURPOSES SHOULD BE CONSIDERED.

Many of the older housing and commercial buildings are vacant, and in time become a blight on the community. The county should consider acquisition of the buildings or encourage their acquisition by non-profit groups for conversion to community-oriented service buildings. Most of these structures are in the most heavily populated, poorest areas of the community. They could well serve the local populace, many of whom are dependent on public transportation and have need of services.

10. A MORE COMPREHENSIVE AND EXPANDED STREETSCAPE PLAN FOR EASTERN BOULEVARD AND MARTIN BOULEVARD IS NECESSARY, AND THIS PLAN SHOULD RECEIVE PRIORITY TREATMENT IN IMPLEMENTATION.

A streetscape plan was adopted and executed for the 400 and 500 blocks of Eastern Boulevard. It, however, did not go far enough. One has only to drive along Eastern Boulevard from the Back River bridge to Carroll Island Road and Martin Boulevard from Rt. 40 to Eastern Boulevard to see how desperately action is needed to upgrade these strips. Concrete medians should be replaced by a turn lane to ease access into businesses along Eastern Boulevard. The grass medians should be curbed and landscaped, and road frontages should be cleaned up with private parking taken out of the public right of way. There are no current plans for any concentrated improvements to Eastern and Martin Boulevards, yet these routes are most associated with the community. The image of the entire community is negatively affected by the lack of action on these roadways, and every step should be taken for their improvement.

11. THE COUNTY SHOULD RESOLVE THE SEVERE FLOODING PROBLEMS IN THE VICTORY VILLA AREA BY PROGRAMMING THIS PROJECT INTO THE CAPITAL BUDGET.

The area of Victory Villa has experienced severe flooding problems resulting in property damage to many homes. Many residents have correspondence from the Department of Public Works dating back to the 1970's promising some action. A consultant will be contracted to prepare options to rectify the problems. The community should have some input on these recommendations.

HOUSING

Although the percentage of home ownership in some of the portions of the Essex - Middle River area is above the county average, much of the area is characterized by older housing selling for substantially less than the county-wide average. In the center of the community rental housing composes over two-thirds of the available housing stock. There is a need to stabilize the rental housing market without adding to it. The home ownership market also needs to be stabilized, and assistance provided to people seeking to buy homes in the area.

OWNER OCCUPIED

12. THE COUNTY SHOULD PROMOTE THE ADOPTION OF A HOME BUYER INCENTIVE PLAN TO BE OFFERED THROUGH EMPLOYERS.

The incentives would consist of help with closing costs and rehabilitation bonuses on true "fix 'er uppers". With the aging housing market many of the owner occupied homes need rehabilitation work. Unfortunately, many of the homes are owned by people on fixed or low incomes for whom the cost of repair is prohibitive. Rather than force the owners out with the possible result of adding to the rental market, there should be incentives for homeowners to fix up their properties.

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13. LENDERS IN MANY INSTANCES HAVE LOW INTEREST LOAN PRODUCTS OF WHICH BUYERS ARE UNAWARE, AND THERE SHOULD BE AN EXTENSION OF THE FIRST TIME BUYERS PROGRAM TO INFORM BUYERS OF THE DIFFERENT PACKAGES AVAILABLE TO THEM ON THE MARKET.

The first time buyers program recently instituted in the community under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce provides valuable information and assistance to persons interested in local home ownership. Lenders frequently have quotas of money to be reinvested in the local communities and have adopted various programs to assist buyers. Their information should be made available in a setting other than the normal business setting so that the buyers can be informed in an atmosphere other than

the banker's office. The buyers' program would seem naturally suited for this task.

14. A LOCAL HOUSING OFFICE SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED IN THE ESSEX - MIDDLE RIVER AREA.

A local housing office could serve several functions. It could compile information on home ownership opportunities in the area and offer housing counseling to members of the community. A staff person could arrange workshops for realtors and buyers to explain programs and lending products available in the area. The staff person also could work as a liaison between the communities and the state and county agencies. The office could also distribute information on inspections, county codes and rental regulations for the area and serve as a base office for county housing services.



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RENTAL HOUSING

The tremendous amount of rental housing in the area has resulted in special issues. The housing code is important to the county, and further enforcement is important, but renter services and security are also important. Many of the residents of the communities are single parents; many others are impoverished. They have special needs, and a proactive approach should be taken to address the needs of the residents and of the rental complexes.

Rental complexes also have a unique impact on county revenues and services. Property taxes for rental complexes usually are based on capitalizing the rental stream of revenue. Consequently, a complex with low vacancy and a high rental rate would pay much more than a complex with high vacancies and low rentals. Unfortunately, complexes which have the lowest rentals and the higher vacancies usually have the greatest demand for service. It can be argued that they are not paying "their fair share" of the tax burden. On the other hand the owners are working off of low margins and revenue streams, and increases in tax burdens either are passed along to tenants who can least afford them or are paid in lieu of necessary maintenance. One way to break the cycle would be to put more responsibility on the tenants and landlords to handle their affairs internally to lessen the burden on county services.

15. LARGER APARTMENT COMPLEXES SHOULD BE REQUIRED TO ADOPT AN ON-SITE RESIDENT LIAISON POSITION.

The development of a resident advocate program, similar to the State funded Service Linked Housing Program, is a cost effective, preventive solution to addressing the needs of individuals and families residing in permanent rental housing, of the rental communities, and of the community as a whole. The integration of housing and support services to individuals and to the community will positively impact the quality of life for all persons living in the community. Resident advocates serve as links and conduits between the individuals and families and the government and social services available to them. In addition, as the resident advocate identifies issues that confront the rental complex as a whole, the

advocates work with the residents and the community to resolve these issues. An example of this would include assisting residents to unite to work toward establishing a drug free environment, neighborhood watches, etc. The Kingsley Park Apartment program, where a small investment has energized a community into a successful revitalization, is an example of a very successful Service Linked Housing Program. The residents have seen the benefit of working together and have worked with the landlord in improving their community. These are partnerships which benefit all levels of the community. The County should assist in funding this position.

16. THERE SHOULD BE EXPANDED INSPECTION AND ENFORCEMENT OF THE COUNTY HOUSING CODE AND OF THE ZONING CODE.

There is a true lack of inspectors to answer legitimate concerns about housing code violations. There really is no funding mechanism for hiring the inspectors. A nominal fee on each landlord for each unit registered in the county, would fund enough inspector positions to make a difference. It also is recognized that tenants create some of the violations, and the enforcement provisions should include tenants who violate the zoning and housing codes so that the landlords who ultimately pay the price of bad tenants should not bear the burden alone. The entire process should also be decriminalized with civil penalties so as to promote easy resolution of the matters and solutions without criminal sanctions and stigma. It makes no sense for zoning violations to be a civil penalty and for housing violations to have a criminal penalty. All of the violations should be removed from the court system where prosecution and resolution are time consuming, somewhat capricious, and frustrating.

17. LARGE APARTMENT COMPLEXES SHOULD BE REQUIRED BY COUNTY GOVERNMENT TO SUPPLY THEIR OWN PRIVATE SECURITY.

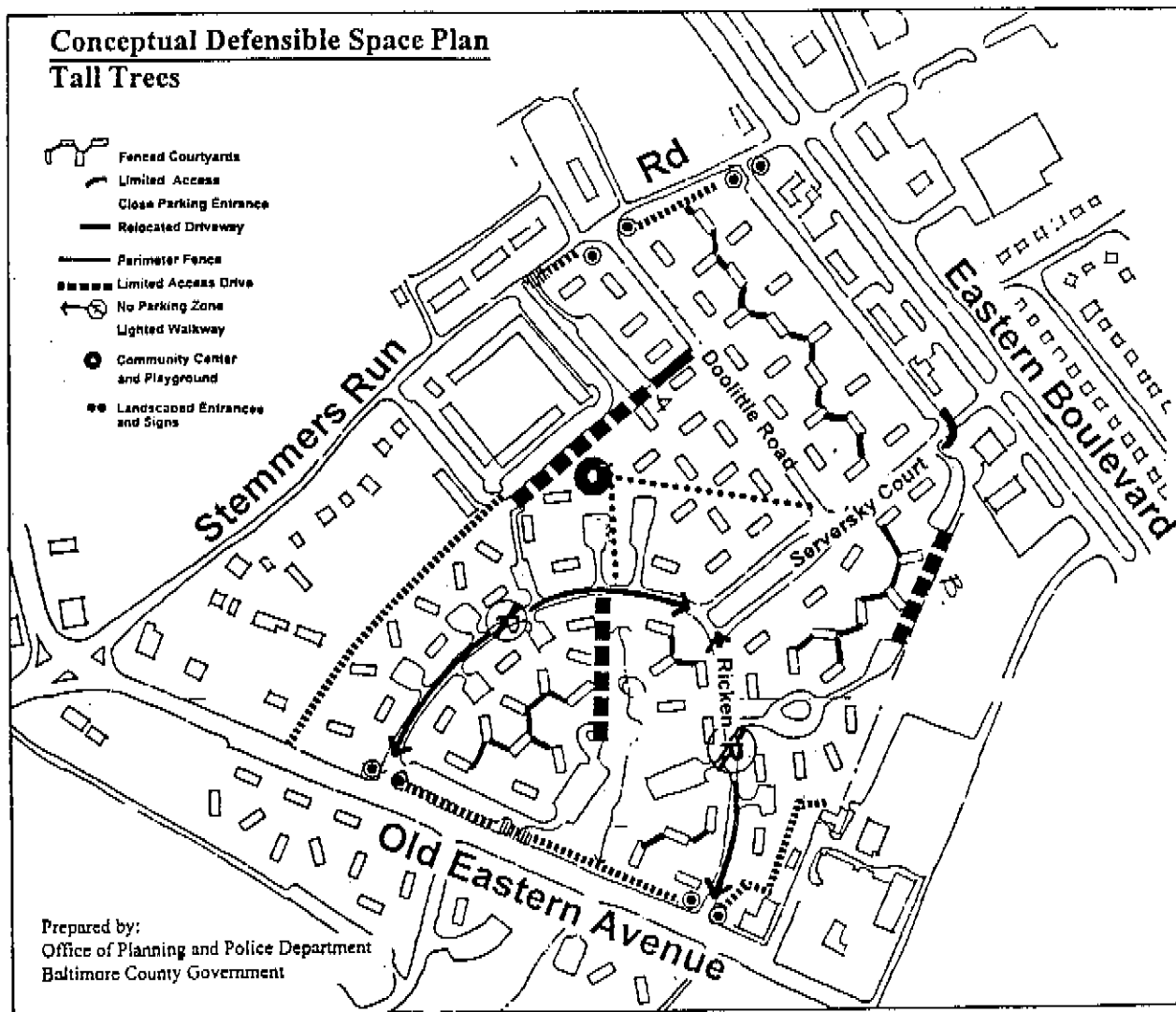
Last year the Essex precinct received almost 60,000 calls for service resulting in over 11,000 reported crimes and over 4,000 arrests. One apartment complex alone accounted for over 15% of the arrests. This is an incredible drain of resources and manpower. Five apartment complexes in the area account for a vast amount of the vice and narcotic

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traffic. The concentration of so many people in the complexes makes them difficult and expensive to police. The private complexes serving more than 100 tenants should supply their own private security to supplement neighborhood watch and the formal police patrols.

18. LARGE APARTMENT COMPLEXES SHOULD BE REQUIRED TO FILE DEFENSIBLE SPACE PLANS WITH BALTIMORE COUNTY.

In most modern complexes defensible space design is not an issue. In the older complexes in the county, security was not an element to be considered in design. As a result there are many hiding places for criminal activity, lots of escape routes, and in some cases poor public safety access. A defensible space plan has been proposed for the Village of Tall Trees, and it has many workable elements that could be utilized in other communities. Complexes of over 50 apartments should be required to file defensible space plans within two (2) years.



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TRANSPORTATION

In a community where so many people are dependent upon public transportation as a sole means of transportation, the lack of adequate public facilities becomes much more apparent. Is it reasonable to expect residents of the study area to take two hours to travel one way to the health care center on Franklin Square Drive and then take another two hours to travel home? It is a distance that can be traversed by car in fifteen (15) minutes. What happens is that people needing service all tend to reach their destination at the same time resulting in long lines for service. This is inefficient and destructive of the relief the service was intended to provide. An entire day is lost. There are two alternatives: either bring the services provided into the community or increase the opportunities for people to reach the service.

19. THE COUNTY SHOULD WORK WITH THE METROPOLITAN TRANSIT AUTHORITY TO EXPAND CROSS COUNTY SERVICE.

Currently, there is a mid-day gap in service to the Towson area. Because there is a bus in the morning and another at night, a trip to Towson is an all day event. The location and design of bus stops should be done in accordance with property owners and the community.

20. RECREATION COUNCILS SHOULD BE ABLE TO ACCESS THE COUNTRYRIDE VANS OR COUNTRYRIDE PROGRAM TO GET THE YOUTH TO THE RECREATIONAL PROGRAMS AFTER SCHOOL AND ON WEEKENDS.

There may be an opportunity when the vans are not otherwise in use to allow the recreation councils to use the vans to transport the youngsters to programs and community activities. Community activities at the local parks are not readily accessible to those dependent on public transportation. There is no service, for instance, to Rocky Point or Miami Beach or other waterfront facilities. Ball fields outside the community are not accessible to those without cars. These public facilities should serve all of the public and not only those with private transportation. In older communities like Essex - Middle River the

countryride vans could be a real help in getting the youth off the streets and to the recreation centers.

21. SHUTTLE SERVICE TO THE HEALTH-EDUCATION COMPLEX ON ROSSVILLE BOULEVARD SHOULD BE EXPANDED.

There are numerous health and educational services available at the Franklin Square Hospital facility and at Essex Community College. Unfortunately, getting there is the major problem. Pre-natal programs, family wellness clinics, rehabilitation facilities, job counseling and placement services are just a few of the important programs that may well be beyond the reach of the very segment of the population which could most benefit from them. The Essex - Middle River community is truly fortunate in having the fine facilities on Rossville Boulevard, but they should be readily accessible.

EDUCATION

The education needs of the community are divisible into school programs and community programs. Within the elementary schools the greatest apparent problem is stability. Three (3) elementary schools, Deep Creek, Middlesex and Mars Estates have turnover rates in excess of 60% per year. During what are arguably the most important educational years the kids are shuttled from school to school often due to a move of only a few blocks. There are other possible means of addressing community stability such as with increased job opportunities, but the schools should look to see if there is something that can be done on a district wide basis to promote stability in education. Attendance is a major problem in the middle and high schools, and goals should be set with programs for attainment of the goals.

On a community level there are opportunities for continuing education through the library, community college system, as well as, adult education centers located in several neighborhood schools that should be explored. Two of the best assets we have in the county are the library system and the community college network. These assets should be enlisted in the community conservation effort.

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22. GOALS SHOULD BE SET FOR ATTENDANCE INCREASE AND MOBILITY REDUCTION.

A suggested goal for attendance would be that by June, 1997, all schools in the community meet state standards for satisfactory attendance. Mobility should be reduced by 10% by June, 1997. The Board of Education has ignored this problem for too long by characterizing it as a local issue; it is a critical issue. We do not need another lost generation. The Board of Education should actively support this mobility reduction initiative. District boundaries can be drawn around the schools with the highest mobility to see if students can stay in the school even if the family moves to another school district within the community. Increased staffing to provide aides in the classrooms and additional pupil personnel workers and social workers would also enhance stability. Additional counseling and family assistance has been shown to greatly reduce mobility. School "voice systems" should be instituted in the five (5) schools with the lowest attendance rates with direct classroom lines where possible.

23. THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS SHOULD BE UTILIZED AS MINI-COMMUNITY CENTERS.

Most of the elementary schools are within walking distance of neighborhoods. Development of a community center program at each elementary school would be the best way to develop the parental involvement needed. The centers should have both in-house and out-reach capabilities. Some services would include parenting skills, mentoring, and computer lab access.

24. THE SCHOOLS SHOULD HAVE ACCESS TO BALTIMORE COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY ON-LINE CATALOG AND INFORMATION SYSTEM, KNOWN AS "EVERYBODY'S CATALOG".

This system has resources including data bases of service providers, government agencies, periodical data bases, and on-line services. It is a resource not only for the faculty but also for the students, parents and community service providers. Having this service at seventeen (17) additional locations to the one (1) currently available makes the service actually usable by the general community.

25. THE ESSEX LIBRARY SHOULD BE UTILIZED AS A FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER.

As indicated in the section on Infrastructure, the Essex library is very centrally located and has much potential as a community center. It can also serve as a family resource or learning center for the entire family. On any given school night the library is filled with children working on projects. Parental involvement can be increased by providing resources aimed at assisting family living. For example, there is a tremendous demand for computers to assist with word processing, resume preparation, literacy development, etc. In addition to more computer work stations, videotapes and audio cassettes can inform on a variety of job-related matters including resumes, home business, etc. These resources are relatively inexpensive, and in an enhanced library environment can really turn the facility into a much utilized family resource.

26. AN EXPANDED CABLE NETWORK SHOULD PROVIDE FOR GREATER ACCESSIBILITY TO ADDITIONAL EDUCATION.

The technology is at hand for more cable channels and greater resources. The county should explore with cable providers the dedication of resources to additional educational opportunities.

27. THERE SHOULD BE ADDITIONAL FUNDING FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE OUTREACH TO LOCAL SCHOOLS FOR TECHNICAL AND INTELLECTUAL ENRICHMENT.

Essex Community College has in the past effectively created partnerships with local schools which enhance the quality of education. It is an unfortunate fact that the public schools in the community as a whole are below average in overall testing. The resources of the college in mentoring and tutoring and outreach programs could assist these schools, and funding should be provided for the assistance.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Public safety is an area that impacts most closely the quality of life in a community. No community can remain stable; no community can attract business or residents if it is not perceived to be a safe place to

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live and raise a family. Regardless of the fact that the Essex - Middle River community is as a whole a safe and secure community, the image is to the contrary. Much of the crime that exists in the community is concentrated in a few areas. There are a number of community and government actions that can be taken to meet the problems which do exist.

28. CITIZEN ON PATROL GROUPS SHOULD BE SUPPORTED AND MAINTAINED.

These groups have been shown to be an effective deterrent to crime and also have the positive effect of involving citizens within the community. The groups can be supported by formulating a training program including training for traffic control and for management for C.O.P. leaders, continuing funding of radios and phones as an on-going budget item, and recruiting new patrols.

29. THE POLICE DEPARTMENT SHOULD CREATE A JUVENILE CRIME TASK FORCE.

Gangs in some of the local communities have begun to contribute to juvenile delinquency. The task force would investigate and educate the public on juvenile crime and gang problems.

30. A COUNTY FUNDED COMMUNITY SERVICE PROGRAM FOR JUVENILES SHOULD BE CREATED.

Although there are some limited opportunities for community service in the juvenile justice system, these opportunities should be expanded. A group would be needed to manage and supervise the juveniles as well as to schedule and to keep track of hours served.

31. PARENTAL COUNSELING SHOULD BECOME A FEATURE OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY PROCEEDINGS.

Current laws allow for parental liability in the event of damage caused by delinquent juveniles, but frequently, this burden is unrealistic given the financial situation of the family. Parental counseling, however, should be a feature of the program with mandates and penalties if not followed.

32. IN THE COMMUNITY CONSERVATION AREAS MONEY SEIZED DUE TO DRUG ENFORCEMENT SHOULD BE WHOLLY RETURNED TO THE PRECINCT FOR USE IN ENFORCEMENT.

Currently, only half of the assets seized are now returned to the police. The balance goes to other areas. Drug use has a disproportionate impact on the older, at risk communities, where there are higher rates of poverty and less opportunities. Consequently, the assets seized from the arrests should be returned to the communities to combat the crime adversely affecting the community as a whole.

33. CURFEWS FOR YOUTH SHOULD BE STUDIED FOR USE IN BALTIMORE COUNTY.

There seems to be little doubt that enforced curfews reduce juvenile crime. Obviously, there are constitutional issues which must be strictly observed. Curfew laws should be seriously examined. The problems created by the proposal should be weighed against its benefits in an objective review.

RECREATION

Parks in the Essex - Middle River area are poorly located to serve the needs of the immediate community. The parks which do exist are on the fringe area of the community and were intended to serve a regional need rather than a local need. There are only 10 county parks within the study area, with a total of 230.5 acres, not including open space and recreational facilities located at county schools. This is wholly inadequate to serve the existing population of over 60,000. Some issues pertaining to infrastructure and transportation already have been addressed, but there are program issues and maintenance issues which also require action.

34. LEADERSHIP OF LOCAL RECREATIONAL PROGRAMS SHOULD BE SUSTAINED BY FUNDING.

Local programs in the older communities lack the sort of funding that is available in wealthier communities. Additional funding sources for local leadership should be found. One idea might be to have a pooled private money fund so that of every dollar obtained from private sources for specific programs so much goes into the pooled fund for distribution to needier areas.

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35. THE MISCONCEPTION THAT EVERYONE MUST PAY IN ORDER TO PLAY IN THE RECREATION COUNCILS MUST BE CORRECTED.

As a matter of fact the recreation councils do not turn away children who can not afford to pay the fees. Unfortunately, that fact has not been adequately promoted, but it should be. Every child should be made to feel welcome regardless of economic status in the recreation programs.

36. OLDER RECREATION FACILITIES NEED ADDITIONAL MAINTENANCE AND SUPPORT.

The facilities in the community conservation areas should be a mandated priority item in maintenance and support. The necessary maintenance is on-going and draining financially but critical in providing attractive facilities. The lack of a solid constituency pressing for maintenance requires structured mandates in order that the work be performed on a continual basis.

37. THE POLICE ATHLETIC LEAGUE PROGRAMS SHOULD BE FULLY SUPPORTED BY GOVERNMENT AND BY THE PRIVATE SECTOR.

The community needs greater involvement from the Police Athletic League. This is a valuable recreational resource particularly in areas where police contact with juveniles frequently may be confrontational in nature. Facilities for the programs should be sponsored by the county, and private fund programs should be established for their support.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Every community should be proactive in recruiting and training community leaders and volunteers to ensure that every neighborhood has adequate representation. Some large communities such as central Essex have no identifiable community group. The larger apartment complexes lack cohesive representation. Although one might be tempted to attribute this lack of representation to the transient nature of the communities, many of the residents have resided in the same complex for decades. The issues really seem to center upon a feeling of

disenfranchisement, of lack of communication skills, and of lack of information.

Another problem in the leadership vacuum is that so much of the leadership development centers around political issues. Although a relatively small percentage of the community is attuned to political issues, politics plays a major part in the leadership structure as opposed to community issues. The advancement of community issues can only be achieved through heightened awareness of resources and the ability to communicate issues and actions to the communities affected and to government representatives.

The existence of this committee and the large degree of participation from all facets of the community demonstrate the strong interest held by many in the improvement of conditions within the community. Inclusiveness is the key to ultimate success, and by developing the leadership potential demonstrated by the interest in this project, many more people will become involved in the actions necessary to strengthen the community.

38. LEADERS FROM THE EDUCATION COMMUNITY SHOULD ASSIST IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR CIVIC ASSOCIATIONS AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS.

Volunteers have stepped forward from the community college and from the public schools to work on programs that will improve and strengthen local associations and to increase awareness of the kind of impact the associations can have on the quality of life in the community.

39. A MORE COORDINATED EFFORT SHOULD BE MADE TO DISSEMINATE INFORMATION ABOUT THE WIDE RANGE OF SERVICES AVAILABLE TO COMMUNITIES.

A single county department should assume responsibility to disseminate information about the services that are available from business and the public sector.

40. LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS SHOULD BE MADE MORE WIDELY ACCESSIBLE TO THE OLDER AREAS OF THE COUNTY.

There currently exist very valuable leadership development programs under various auspices. These programs have some scholarship participation, but are primarily directed toward corporate entities members of whom are seeking to develop leadership skills within the metropolitan community. There should be increased funding of scholarships to the programs and greater dissemination of the availability of the programs within the community. Time is always a problem for the small business owner, not to mention the single parent, but those with an interest have always come forward, and the provision of leadership programs in a non-political context is critically important within the older communities.